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First spouses

TIME magazine was once doing a major story on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and asked Secretary of State George P. Shultz for a quote summing up his views of her.

"I'd hate to be her husband if she got home and I didn't have dinner ready for her," said Shultz.

For the ever-discreet Shultz it was a mildly daring comment, but it captured in humorous vein his considerable admiration for her toughness. And he was persuaded that Mrs. Thatcher's husband, Denis, would find it funny enough not to be offensive.

Actually, in a bid to soften her image somewhat, Mrs. Thatcher has lately been letting herself be photographed stirring cabbage and performing other domestic chores. But with a perfectly adequate staff at No. 10 Downing Street, the fact is that the Thatchers have little need to do the cooking themselves.

However, though life at the top may be plush, the spouses of world leaders have been having a tough time of it lately, and probably a little humor helps them cope.

Mr. Thatcher, for instance, has long been getting merciless treatment in those British publications specializing in intellectual humor. He is depicted as a kind of bumbling "first gentleman." The British understand all this kind of humor rather well and don't take it too seriously, and it is to be hoped Mr. Thatcher doesn't either.

First Lady Nancy Reagan has been the butt of some less charitable criticism. Early in her husband's presidency, she was under attack for extravagant spending at the White House, and on haute couture gowns. She defused much of that criticism by throwing herself seriously into antidrug work, and also by a remarkable, self-mocking performance at a Washington Gridiron Club dinner. Dressed in hand-me-downs, she wowed the Washington press corps with her own version of Barbra Streisand's "Secondhand clothes" song.

For some years after that, Mrs. Reagan got a good press, but during the Irangate debacle she again came under fire. This time some commentators cast her as a "dragon lady," the sinister figure behind a slipping President, manipulating and maneuvering.

What has since become clear is that while Mr. Reagan suffered a serious political setback, he is totally capable and coherent and that all Mrs. Reagan was doing was trying to support him and extricate him from a rough patch. If that is a crime, then half the wives in America must be dragon ladies.

And now it is Raisa Gorbachev's turn. The criticism of her seems far from benevolent. Somebody has put together a clandestine videotape showing the Soviet leader's wife shopping abroad for jewelry and fashionable Western clothing. She is supposed to be shown signing for some of these items on an American Express Gold Card.

The tape is apparently circulating on the Moscow underground and is intended to stir criticism of her, and probably, by indirection, her husband's attempt to shake up the Soviet system.

Who made the tape? Mr. Gorbachev's enemies within the USSR are prime suspects. Some point the finger at the KGB, which certainly would have the technical background and the opportunity to shoot such an undercover film. However, a Western intelligence agency, such as the CIA, cannot be ruled out.

I hope the CIA is not the culprit in this. Mrs. Gorbachev's emergence may pose problems for the Soviets, for the wives of their leaders have traditionally been kept in the background in the past. But we should encourage, not deride, first spouses with a little independence, a little flair. And if they are communist first spouses, a little rising expectation, a little admiration for Western style, is not a bad thing to take back home to such a drab, gray capital as Moscow.

The American Express Company - if you'll excuse the expression - is probably tickled pink. They're probably trying to figure out how they can get Raisa to do one of their commercials.